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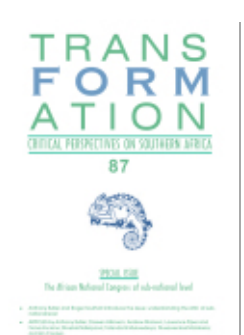
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# Introduction

## Understanding the ANC at sub-national level

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### Abstract

The political entrenchment of the African National Congress (ANC) as the ruling party in South Africa over the last two decades has given rise to an extensive literature focussing upon negative internal trends such as factionalism, the manipulation of internal electoral processes, the pursuit of individual wealth, internal disorder, and increasing tensions within the tripartite alliance. Such trends, along with growing levels of popular protest, suggest a decline in the party's legitimacy and long term prospects. Such organisational deterioration has occasioned an extensive reflective literature, yet there has been little detailed research into how the ANC operates on the ground. Overwhelmingly, predominant paradigms – of the ANC as a national liberation movement; as a party that has fallen victim to neo-patrimonialism; as a dominant party; and as a vehicle of neo-liberal capitalism – are all illuminating, yet simultaneously entrench key weaknesses in analysis, focussing upon over-arching narratives rather than encouraging careful analysis of causal practices. Much of this flows from the fact that academic analysts lack practical and intuitive knowledge of the ANC's institutional life, complexity and informal networks. The present collection seeks to correct that balance by presenting a set of papers which focus upon the dynamics of the ANC at sub-national level, pointing the way to a more critical engagement with party processes than is usually presented.

The African National Congress (ANC) is a uniquely powerful presence in South African politics. It has been the party of national government for more than two decades and it controls eight out of the nine provincial governments. The liberation movement has more than a million members. Its internal elections, candidate list processes, and 'deployments' determine who occupies key public offices. Its extended ideological and programmatic deliberations shape the policy agendas of the national government.

An extensive academic literature has emerged concerning the century long history of the ANC (Lissoni et al 2012, Sapire and Saunders 2013) together with a contrasting official history that celebrates the fulfilment of the ANC's historic destiny as a movement for liberation. However, despite the importance of the ANC for the contemporary politics and government of South Africa, its more recent political trajectory – most particularly since it became a party of government in 1994 – is much less well understood.

Many of the bald facts are relatively, if not entirely, uncontroversial. Academic authorities and popular commentators alike regularly point to a series of apparently negative trends: the emergence of factionalism at all levels of the party; the manipulation and monetisation of processes for electing leaders and selecting candidates; the growing importance for the ANC's political dynamics of the pursuit of 'resources' (jobs, tenders and public services); a fading of 'non-racialism'; the re-emergence of traditional leaders as a major internal constituency; growing violence and disorder in party conferences and meetings; tensions within the tripartite alliance between the ANC and the Congress of South African Trade Unions (Cosatu) and the South African Communist Party (SACP); and deepening patron-client relationships across the movement. The ANC, on one recent authoritative account, has been transformed 'from a rule-regulated, mass-based party into an organization in which internal dynamics are mostly shaped by personal interests' (Lodge 2014:1).

The rise of Jacob Zuma to the ANC presidency in 2007, and then to the state presidency in 2009, has intensified such critical analysis. Zuma's ascendancy was built in part on a regional and ethnic mobilisation ostensibly alien to ANC tradition. He has asserted a notably personal power, expressed in his own relatives' prodigious business interests, the rise of certain associates such as the Gupta family, and the advantages Zuma personally derived from expenditures on his rural homestead (Southall 2011).

The growing crisis of capacity in the state, and the paralysis that has gripped important parastatals such as Eskom and South African Airways, has raised fresh fears about the ability of the ANC to govern effectively. Parastatals and public service appointments are increasingly politicised and patronage based, with cronyism seemingly more prevalent than strategic political 'deployment'. Meanwhile, the number and intensity of 'service delivery protests' suggests that the ability of the movement to retain legitimacy on the basis of performance may be fading. As a party of government, the ANC has found itself unable to advance coherent economic

and developmental policies, and the movement's leaders often appear confused and divided about the proper relationship between the state and the liberation movement.

The widely shared but loosely specified sentiment that the ANC is undergoing some form of serious organisational deterioration has generated a significant reflective literature. Scholars have illuminatingly tried to explain how such an apparently dysfunctional entity can continue to cohere at all (Bonner 2012) and to set out how the movement accomplishes the 'regeneration of political power' (Booyesen 2012). Others have explored the nature and implications of ANC factionalism, and the puzzle as to how the movement continues to do reasonably well in national and provincial elections (see Piper and Anciano, this volume). The evident role that competition for 'resources' plays in the internal politics of the ANC has also become a growing preoccupation of scholars (for example Butler 2010).

The causes and inexorable quality of the ANC's degeneration both remain controversial. It is possible to track many of the historical sequences of events that have contributed to the growing disarray within the ANC. As Lodge (2014:8) observes in a recent analysis, the movement has always been infused with personalistic and dynastic politics and shaped by powerful 'networks of notables'. It became entangled with criminal networks both in exile and during the end-game of the domestic struggle (Ellis 2012). When the ANC was re-created as a mass party in the early 1990s, bantustan elites, with their corrupt patronage systems, were incorporated into the movement's structures. The demands of political financing in a competitive electoral system meanwhile encouraged ANC leaders to trade political influence for party funds (Butler 2010).

The country's unique history of institutionalised racial discrimination meanwhile necessitated urgent interventions to empower black South Africans in the formal economy from which they had been excluded. These black empowerment interventions may have been politically inescapable, but they simultaneously created opportunities for the politicisation of licensing and state tenders, and for the emergence of a major rent-seeking black elite trading primarily on political connections. Further 'sins of incumbency' have arisen as an unintended consequence of the ANC's control of massive revenue streams over a period of more than two decades (Netshitenzhe 2012).

Conflict in the ANC has also flowed from changes in the class character of the organisation. It now embraces an affluent bourgeoisie, a new middle

class (primarily populated by public sector employees), a traditional working class, in the mines, factories and service industries, and a broader base among the poor and economically marginalised. The divergent interests of these classes are inevitably reflected in intractable internal disputes about public policy.

Despite the energy and perceptiveness of much of this analysis, there is very little detailed research into the underlying dynamics of ANC politics on the ground.

One problem has been that the fascinating political struggle unfolding in South Africa has been interpreted through pre-existing analytical frameworks. Several broad paradigms have helped scholars to frame their analyses of the political dynamics of the ANC. First, the ANC has been viewed as a liberation movement shaped by the history of colonial and post-colonial southern Africa. The comparative study of southern African liberation movements in power has yielded significant insights into the trajectory of the ANC. As one comparative study emphasises, liberation movements across the region have become corrupt, authoritarian, and intolerant of opposition, while celebrating their own political authority (Southall 2013). Denigrating opposition parties as illegitimate, they have also carried forward the militaristic, secretive, and hierarchical internal cultures that they were required to develop during armed struggle.

Emboldened by electoral success, and in command of state resources, post-liberation elites have collapsed boundaries between state and society, adopted the lifestyles and pretensions of their colonial forebears, and cynically engaged in projects of personal enrichment under the cover of programmes of indigenisation.

While some debate whether conditions in South Africa resemble those in other post-liberation countries in the region – the economy is relatively developed, the society is more urbanised, and the population is more diverse and contains a bigger settler element – the ruling style of fellow liberation movements in the region offers valuable insights into the potential evolution of the ANC as a party of government.

A second paradigm locates the ANC as an African political party that has fallen prey to the logic of clientelism – or, as this phenomenon has been understood by African regional specialists, ‘neo-patrimonialism’. Neo-patrimonial regimes have conventionally been understood as ‘systems in which political relationships are mediated through, and maintained by, personal connections between leaders and subjects, or patrons and clients’

(Pitcher et al 2009: 129). While reciprocity and exchange are broadly benevolent or even desirable phenomena in local settings, once transferred to the state or to bureaucratic politics they generate pathologies such as personal aggrandisement, nepotism, administrative inefficiency and corruption.

Neo-patrimonialism is typically construed as a modern variant of 'traditional' patrimonialism, expanded from local to national settings, and imbued with a veneer of rational-legal authority that was imposed by the colonial power in urban areas. Colonialism left in place – and perhaps intensified through the mechanisms of indirect rule – an underlying patrimonial logic that fuels personal patronage, clientelism, and corruption.

The use of neo-patrimonialism as an analytical category is controversial, most particularly because it attributes a characteristic form of rule to an entire continent (Erdmann and Engel 2007). The label has been applied to a very wide range of states in Africa that appear to be quite heterogeneous in regime type, ideology, and leadership style (Pitcher et al 2009:133). It is unclear whether the term refers to a set of social relations, a mode of rent-seeking behaviour, an economic logic based on a blurring of public authority and private gain, or a regime type associated specifically (and without clear explanation) with Africa (Pitcher et al 2009:131). Likewise it remains debatable whether neo-patrimonialism is the cause of laggardly development in Africa or a consequence of it.

The applicability of neo-patrimonial analysis to South Africa has been especially strongly contested. One prominent historian of modern South Africa has recently claimed that 'the ANC's patrimonial characteristics are becoming more pronounced' (Lodge 2014:3). Contrary to the defenders of national 'exceptionalism', therefore, Lodge claims that 'the argument that South African politics represents an exception to the general trends that shape political life elsewhere in sub-Saharan Africa is becoming less compelling'.

The less controversial analytical language of 'clientelism' has been less fully utilised by scholars of contemporary South Africa and this has greatly limited the potential for fruitful comparative study of other developing countries and new democracies outside Africa (but see Bénit-Gbaffou 2012, Dawson 2014). Among the 60 or so countries around the world that formed part of the 'third wave' of democratisation in the 1980s and 1990s, the problems of state building and economic development have markedly paralleled those in South Africa. Indeed, it has become, if not a conventional wisdom, then at least a widely shared proposition, that countries that

become representative democracies before they have built a coherent and capable state administration are almost certain to be organised along clientelist lines. Clientelism, indeed, is an almost natural development in circumstances in which mass party organisations mobilise large numbers of citizens for the first time and then distribute favours to their supporters using their party machines (Fukuyama 2014).

In a third analytic framework, the ANC has been situated as a ‘dominant party’ or as the governing party in a ‘dominant party system’ (Giliomee and Simkins 1999, Bogaards and Boucek 2010, Doorenspleet and Nijzink 2013; but see Southall 2005). On most accounts, the ANC is a classic dominant party, because it has secured resounding national election victories for two decades, it seems set to continue as the party of national government for years to come, and it has dominated the ideological and policy-making landscape of its society. This analytic paradigm has recently benefited from major theoretical and conceptual innovations, and there is now a rich empirical literature on the rise and fall of dominant party systems (for example Friedman and Wong 2008).

There are particular lessons to be drawn from the experiences of dominant parties from middle income countries which are obliged to negotiate the same kinds of political challenges – inequality, rapid urbanisation, and changing class structure – that face the ANC in South Africa. Socio-economic and developmental factors, on this analysis, are crucial for framing relevant comparisons. South Africa is a relatively advanced and urbanised economy with a long history of proletarianisation, advanced capital formations, complex state-business relations, a substantial middle class, and powerful trade unions. In short, the country’s unique history, in the context of sub-Saharan Africa, introduces compelling reasons to compare her political development to that of other middle income developing countries (Butler 2014).

A fourth prominent paradigm has involved the elaboration of Marxist-influenced critiques of the policy and political decisions of the ANC since 1994, and what are characterised as its ‘neo-liberal’ economic programmes (Pons-Vignon and Segatti 2013). A variety of analysts have drawn attention to the structural constraints that the global capitalist economy and fiscal sustainability impose on any party of government, and also to the mystificatory character of bourgeois democracy in a capitalist global order (Mckinley 2001, Bond 2004, Saul and Bond 2014).

Such overarching frameworks of explanation have allowed scholars to

indulge in broad (and sometimes unfocused and moralising) reflections on the political trajectory of the ANC. The travails of the party have been characterised as typical manifestations of liberation movement deterioration (or even as ‘Zanufication’); as the abuses of power and constitutional propriety typical of dominant parties; as the emerging (and widely anticipated) pathologies of the African neo-patrimonial state; or as the (again not altogether unexpected) betrayal of the disadvantaged by the accumulators of capital. In much of this writing, research on the ANC has become a source of convenient data (to be harvested) and less convenient or amenable truths (to be ignored). Much of the consequent writing tends to ‘present what is effectively a caricature of the ANC, by selectively highlighting features of its practices that conform to a pre-determined pathology, rather than acknowledging the ANC’s complexity, variability and essentially contested nature’ (Southall 2014:331).

The influence of such wider intellectual paradigms has arguably entrenched four key weaknesses of the academic literature on the ANC, by focusing attention towards overarching and moralising narratives and by diverting intellectual energies and resources away from the careful analysis of causal processes.

The first weaknesses is a continued preoccupation with the national level of politics. The focus of many analysts is on national leaders, factional politics at the level of the national government, the relationships between the constituent elements of the tripartite alliance at national level, national leadership elections, and the relations between the party and the state at the level of the national government.

Second, there has been a corresponding paucity of analysis of ANC provinces, regions and branches, and their relationships to tripartite alliance partners, civic associations, business interests, and to the provincial and local states. Equally importantly, there have been relatively few attempts to explore the relations between different levels of the ANC, and to investigate the relationships between the party and the state (and its resource streams) at these different levels.

Third, studies of the ANC have typically been ‘top-down’, focusing on the actions and relationships of prominent leaders and their associates. This results in part from a relationship of partial dependency of academic researchers on the investigative resources of the news media and civil society organisations.



Fourth, most of the work on the ANC has been written by ANC ‘outsiders’. Doubtless, many advantages flow from academic detachment and from a refusal to engage in partisan analysis. In contrast, political participants, writing about the internal politics of their own parties, often make spectacular misjudgements.

However, many, if not most, analysts of contemporary ANC politics lack practical and intuitive knowledge about the movement’s intellectual and political life, its institutional and organisational complexity, and the informal networks through which power is often exercised. Most of the languages and key concepts deployed in political argument in ANC regional and provincial meetings and congresses are not accessible to professional researchers. Few academic analysts are able to master the relationships between religion and politics, or between traditional authorities and ANC power brokers, or indeed to understand the actions and intentions of key political actors in peri-urban settlements or rural communities. To a larger extent than it is comfortable to acknowledge, the academic community in South Africa is estranged from the broader society, and from the political movements that it seeks to understand.

The articles in this special issue largely eschew national historical narratives and broader explanatory paradigms to focus on political dynamics at sub-national levels in the ANC. Anthony Butler’s paper explores the massive growth in the membership of the ANC over the past decade. He shows that this growth has been driven not by deliberate recruitment strategies but rather by subnational political competition and by factional conflicts. Butler identifies the key drivers of membership growth as the pursuit of power within the ANC and the pursuit of advantages outside it. Drawing on an internal party investigation into candidate list processes, he shows the degree to which procedural manipulation has come to characterise ANC branch and regional politics across South Africa.

In her contribution, Doreen Atkinson explores the evolution of provincial government since 1994. Like previous articles, this analysis finds that the control of resources has been central to developments in provincial political life. ANC provincial structures map onto provincial governments and they have become parasitic upon their revenue streams. These resources are delivered regardless of performance by largely unaccountable administrations and patronage networks have been built around them. Such patterns of patronage politics were kick-started by the absorption of homelands into provinces in 1994 and by the political power of chiefs. One consequence of

the evolving dynamic of provincial patronage is that neighbouring provinces have no interest in collaborating with one another – although, according to Atkinson, they do play a major role as ‘kingmakers’ in national elective conferences.

Andrew Manson explores factionalism in the North West province. Created as an amalgam of western Transvaal and the bantustan of Bophuthatswana, North West has faced exceptional political challenges. Manson shows how personalised politics and endemic factionalism fueled corruption during the platinum boom, and ensured that the pursuit of resources, rather than ideological goals, would become a central preoccupation of provincial political elites.

Laurence Piper and Fiona Anciano examine the relationships between the ANC and civil society at local level. Drawing on case study research in Johannesburg and Cape Town, they argue that twin patterns of domination characterise local politics. The ‘political society’, in the form of the ANC and its allies, dominates local ‘civil society’; and, within the ANC, local branches are unable to assert themselves in the face of control ‘from above’. Drawing on empirical research, they argue that this results in the closure of space for local citizen activism and so for effective political accountability.

Mcebisi Ndletyana traces the rapid emergence of patronage politics within the post-1994 ANC. He draws upon three contrasting case studies – a semi-rural township in Free State, a rural village in the Eastern Cape, and an informal settlement in Gauteng – to show how the mechanisms of patronage politics work in local communities. Ndletyana emphasises that this form of politics has driven normative and ideological considerations out the deliberative life of these ANC structures.

Tatenda Mukwedeya’s article addresses the phenomenon of factionalism that has been the subject of extended commentary at national level. Mukwedeya, however, explores factionalism at the ‘micro’ level by means of a case study of Buffalo City region in the Eastern Cape. Drawing on an analytical typology recently advanced by Boucek (2009), he shows that factionalism in Buffalo City has been primarily based on material interests rather than on ideology.

Musawenkosi Malabela explores the role of the branch as the ‘basic unit’ of the ANC. The ANC’s constitution and its internal mythology locates the branch in an important position. Branches control 90 per cent of the vote at elective conferences. Ordinary branch members are charged with various responsibilities for policy deliberation and for the selection of appropriate

candidates and leaders. By means of a case study of a branch in Mpumalanga, however, Malabela points to the pathologies that characterise branch politics in practice. He identifies organisational disarray, procedural manipulation, member quiescence, and money-politics as unattractive contemporary realities. Democracy is currently suppressed by local and regional elites rather than respected, and ‘ghost members’, ‘dirty lobbying’ and other pathologies make the assertion of branch power impossible.

Finally, Ian Cooper’s article explores the changing character of factionalism in the ANC. His focus is on Jacob Zuma’s re-election as ANC president at the liberation movement’s 2012 conference at Mangaung. Most previous studies of this event have explored national level factions only, and focused in particular the fluid alliance between Cosatu, the SACP, the ANC Youth League and others that brought about the removal of Thabo Mbeki from the ANC’s presidency. Cooper argues that factional politics needs to be understood in a more nuanced way that pays due attention to the provincial and local levels of the movement.

This wide range of perspectives on the ANC at sub-national level inevitably raises as many questions as it answers. These contributions suggest that the dynamics of patronage politics, rent seeking, and the pursuit of resources may indeed be becoming, or have become, the key driving forces behind ANC politics at sub-national level. They also confirm that ANC internal democracy has become reduced to a farce in many of the movement’s branches and that there is limited, and decreasing, space for ideological and policy deliberation.

These articles indicate that the subnational politics of the ANC are not yet very well understood by scholars; in turn, this throws into question conventional narratives about the meaning and significance of the ANC’s overall trajectory. One sobering conclusion that might be drawn from such a collection is that scholars have proven better at constructing elaborate national historical and analytic narratives about the ANC than at understanding the actual political dynamics of the movement as it operates on the ground.

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